

VT Healthy Soil Protection & Restoration Act
Soil Health Management Systems
Stephen Leslie

We can begin a phased transition for agriculture and forestry by implementing Soil Health Management Systems. Using pre-existing templates such as the Nutrient Management Plan of the ANR and NRCS 10-point planning tool as a model; teams comprised of state, federal agents, NGO's and independent consultants can assist land managers in developing soil health plans. The aim is for long term adoption of practices with commensurate long term financial incentives and technical assistance.

Each land manager will have a “team” of experts to help implement and troubleshoot. Site characteristics and social context will be taken into account to ensure an equitable and just transition toward organic regenerative management.

All practices should be seen as comprising a synergy of effects to restore the totality of landscape functions of the farm or forest ecosystem. Incentives will no longer be granted piecemeal for specific practices---rather participants are encouraged and helped to develop comprehensive plans.

Soil Health Management Systems would allow for the land manager to apply for assistance on a variety of practices *under a single contract*. This would increase enrollment and voluntary compliance.

The Conservation Districts will be funded and empowered to administer the contract process and will create an on-line portal to coordinate the delivery of services and programs. Incentives are a favorable approach over regulations. Successful pilot projects and farmer-to-farmer training are proven methods for accelerating the adoption of healthy soils practices among the legacy farming community.

All farmers and forest land managers who are willing to adopt Soil Health Management Systems should be offered a base income. This would be a simplified way of compensating for ecological services. It would rely on mean averages for measurement on comparable pilot operations. It would ensure that small farmers don't get left behind by carbon trading schemes with a sole focus on payments for additionality per acre.

Base income would not have to be a set figure but rather could focus on ensuring that responsible qualified land managers (and their employees) are receiving a VT living wage for their labor---in this way it could be best described as a “safety net” and could be a whole set of programs and incentives rather than simply a direct payment.

Carbon farming is a long term proposition. Land managers willing and able to practice regenerative principles and practices will require a steady guaranteed income. Every farm will experience ebbs and flows in sequestration, but there is not a farm in Vermont that can't build more soil organic matter. It is this cumulative effect that is exponentially important and why payment should be equitable across the board for all land managers participating in soil health management regardless of acreage.

It is not practical to measure carbon sequestration, water quality and other enhanced functions on every farm every year. Therefore UVM should continue to conduct trials and monitor pilot farms to establish median averages resulting from the implementation of soil health plans.